

## HOC Speech Civil Rights and Civil Liberties

Good morning, my name is Jessica Berg. I am in my eleventh year as a high school English teacher in Loudoun County, Virginia where I live with my husband and two extraordinary daughters. Teaching is not the profession I originally planned on, but there is not a day that goes by that I am not thankful for whatever fates led me into the classroom because it has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.

However, this past December, along with teachers across the nation, I was on the precipice of leaving the profession because of what political groups and politicians have done to education.

This crusade against critical thinking has instilled fear in teachers: fear of repercussions for speaking up, fear of being fired for doing what we know to be right, fear of receiving actual death threats from members of our own community. And the continued challenge to our professionalism, our expertise, our compassion and our empathy for ALL of our students has cracked the will of underpaid and overworked teachers.

I hope to give brief insight into what we, as educators and English teachers aim to achieve in the classroom but more than that, I want to share the words from some of my students because theirs is the voice that is often forgotten in these discussions.

The one thing I save year to year is the letters my students write to me. Re-reading them, I am reminded that the biggest thing students take away from their time in English is the safe space created within the classroom walls and the books that play a pivotal role in their lives, leading them to lessons that extend beyond the classroom walls.

These are the books you are banning.

Books that offer a mirror to readers so they can see themselves reflected in some way, be it their gender, race, culture, identity or experience and it makes them feel less alone in the world. When they see themselves reflected, students do not feel erased and they maintain their self-efficacy, the belief that their voice matters.

And when I think about the books frequently being challenged, the only connection I see between them is that they are the books that give voice to the most marginalized in our society.

A few years ago, I taught a brilliant young woman who almost missed her chance to go to college because she didn't yet understand the power of her voice. In a letter she writes:

*(N's Letter): I will miss you so much when I go off to college, but I will always remember you. You have taught me so many lessons inside and outside the classroom. You have changed my life...because you showed me during a difficult time that my voice matters and I should stand up for what I believe in.*

But the political groups and politicians out there banning books don't want that. They don't want everyone to feel like they have a voice because the status quo is predicated on silence.

And not only is banning these stories and censoring history preventing students from being able to find their voice, but it is negatively affecting my ability as an educator to connect with my students in a meaningful way.

The entrance into these life lessons that leave an impact on students is stories. As one student wrote:

*(S's Letter): Ms. Berg taught me a life lesson through her evident passion for the worlds of novels. She let us explore the world outside of the bubble that we rarely escape. This lesson is one I will never forget.*

That is the power of books; they offer students a window to see a world beyond themselves, in the hopes they understand that what divides us as humans is infinitesimal in the face of what unites us.

These are the books you are banning.

And it is a fallacy when political groups ban these books under the guise of parental rights. I am a parent. Of course, we have rights in our student's education. But the parent teacher team has been broken by the divisiveness of the moment.

The loud, angry subset of political parents do not communicate directly with teachers anymore, instead they go straight to the school board and yell.

If you do not want your child to read a particular book, that's fine. But that does not give you the right make that decision for every other student in the county, or across the nation who might find a lifeline in the very book you banned.

I understand wanting to protect your kids. I want to protect my two young daughters, fiercely, and for as long as I can. But I also want to prepare them for the real world. So, when I am not there to be their shield, I want to know that I have armed them with the sword of every story and the impenetrable power of knowledge that just might give them the ability to survive.

And through my work as an educator, I hope to make the world my daughters will head into just a little bit better, one story and one student at a time. And it was a former student who defined what we aim to do as educators so eloquently:

*(M's email): Ms. Berg, You are the best and most inspirational teacher I've ever had, ... You taught me more than grammar and writing skills; you opened my mind and prepared me to seek understanding from a wide variety of perspectives. I am better equipped to process life and its complexities because of the time that I spent in your class, and I can't thank you enough for that.*

Maybe if we all were prepared to seek understanding from a wide variety of perspectives, we too would be better equipped to process life and all of its gorgeous complexities.